



69: I've been holding out for what seems so long, my dear by cali-chan

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His friends liked to tease him that it was love at first sight. In reality, it wasn't. It took about an hour or so. And he knew he needed to tell her...

I lied. THIS is the schmoopiest thing I've ever written.

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His friends liked to tease him that it was love at first sight. In reality, it wasn't. It took about an hour or so.

Sure, he'd recognized that she had pretty features, somewhere around the time it clicked in his mind that she was actually a girl and not a boy as they'd first thought. But at the time he'd been more preoccupied with worrying about Will, feeling miserable for being caught out in the rain in the middle of the frigid night, and being shocked that they'd found some random kid wandering through the forest instead of their missing best friend.

The first time he could remember feeling... some kind of warmth for her was when they arrived at his house that night. She had been sitting on the couch, drenched and scared, and he had offered her some clean clothes for her to change into. She had pulled the bundle of fabric toward her face and smelled its freshly laundered scent, felt its soft texture against her cheek— things he took for granted every day.

The fact that there were people out there who didn't have all the comforts he had in his life... it was something he thought about sometimes, particularly around Will, whose family wasn't the most well-off in their little group. He and Lucas and Dustin knew Will could feel a little embarrassed about not having as much money, so they usually just ignored it, assuring their friend that it wasn't a big

deal. It didn't matter to Mike, anyway; as far as he was concerned, Will was just like any of his friends, and it wasn't the money that mattered when it came to family, anyway— it was love. And Will's mother and brother loved him so much, it was never even a question in Mike's mind.

The girl, however, was acting like she didn't even have that. It was like she hadn't seen clean, warm clothes in her entire life, and it tugged at Mike's heart. When she did that, it made him want to reach out and give her a hug— which was crazy, because he was *twelve* and she was a *girl* and he'd never felt the urge to hug a girl who wasn't directly related to him in his entire life— and for a second he'd thought, maybe, it was just the product of twelve years of Karen Wheeler drilling it into his head to be considerate of the less fortunate. But looking back on that moment now, he could recognize that there was something about her that immediately made him want to help her in any way he could. Care for her.

Protect her.

Back then, though, he hadn't had much time to process what the funny feeling in his chest was, because she proceeded to try and change in front of them— which Dustin still hadn't let up about until this day, by the way ("Hey, remember that time El tried to get naked in front of us? That was craaaaaazy"). But when Mike led her to the bathroom and tried to close the door, right then, he felt something again.

That was probably the moment, he thought, that this gravitational pull she seemed to have on him started. She was obviously scared out of her mind, wary and skittish, like a deer perpetually caught in the headlights of a truck. But even so, she looked at him straight in the eye when he spoke to her. Dead on, barely even blinking. Mike was awkward in the best of situations, babbling much too often and focusing on too many things at once, so he'd never really experienced having someone's full attention on him that way. She was clearly terrified, and probably didn't understand what was going on, but still, she wouldn't look away. It was kind of amazing to him. Magnetic.

He found himself wanting to know more about her. And then day by day, conversation by conversation, moment by moment, the more he

knew about her, the more drawn he was to her.

He couldn't pinpoint exactly when curiosity turned into infatuation. It might've been when he saw her come out of Nancy's room in his sister's hand-me-down dress and a blonde wig— but less because of the dress or the wig themselves, and more because of the way she glowed while wearing them. It might've been when the school's Heathkit exploded and he felt his heart drop to the bottom of his stomach when he thought she might've been hurt. Or perhaps when they were looking around for the portal, the way she would grab at his sleeve and lean into him when she asked him to turn around, unknowing of the swooping feeling her closeness created in his stomach.

The switch might have flipped when Lucas was accusing her of betraying them, because the anger that flared in him definitely wasn't normal, that raw urge to defend her from anything and everything—even his own best friend. Or it might've been a few minutes later, when Lucas left and he turned around to find her missing. The panic he'd felt then, knowing she was gone, on her own, and that it was all his fault for yelling at her, was almost enough to choke him up.

He knew with all certainty that he was a goner for her when she saved him from dying at the cliff.

Oh, he continued to deny that his friendship with El was any different than his friendship with the guys. He denied it through those seven days and he denied it after, because, again, he was *twelve* and getting teased about having a crush was embarrassing. But in his own heart, he knew he *like* liked her. She'd saved him, and he'd risked his life for her. He'd made a fool of himself trying to explain his feelings without really having to explain his feelings. He'd kissed her. He missed her like crazy every single day she was gone. When she came back, he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. He wanted to explain anything and everything to her. He wanted to impress her. He wanted to see her smile, all the time. He wanted to *make* her smile.

Thirteen-year-old Mike knew he liked her. Sixteen-year-old Mike knew he was in love with her— and moreover, he knew he'd loved her all along.

He hadn't told her yet. Or anyone, really. It wasn't like his friends and family didn't know he had feelings for her— they were dating, for Christ's sake; had been for a while now— but they didn't know about the magnitude of those feelings, and he was still wary of getting teased for being "mushy" (why was he friends with those jerks, again?). Part of it might just be that *he* wasn't ready to admit the magnitude of his feelings, too. He loved her, that was easy enough to admit to himself, but sometimes it caught him off guard just how *much* he loved her. It felt like every time he thought he couldn't love her any more, his feelings grew and grew, and that was overwhelming. You weren't supposed to find the love of your life at twelve, right? That was crazy.

But he had. He'd never been more certain of anything in his life.

And he knew he needed to tell her... not just because she deserved to know, either. He felt like every time he looked at her, that all-encompassing feeling bloomed in his chest and threatened to burst out through his every pore. He was afraid one day the confession would just pour out of his mouth in the most stupidly embarrassing way, at the most inappropriate moment, or in the presence of the most mortifying audience, and that was pretty much his worst nightmare. The storyteller in him was kept awake at night coming up with worst-case scenarios that traumatized him for life before they even happened.

He was thinking too much. He was thinking too much, and he needed to tell her before he made a mess out of things. So the moment he got his driver's license, he pulled El along to his car (well, Nancy's old car that she wasn't using anymore because she was away for college) and drove all the way outside of Hawkins, away from his annoying friends, his nosy mother, her overprotective guardian— everybody they knew— where they could be alone, so that he could finally tell her.

He parked the car at the lookout point just off the small country road they'd been driving on for the past few minutes and killed the engine. They were about an hour and a half out of Hawkins, at the top of a hill that overlooked the edge of Brown County State Park. It was Will (the only nice person out of their entire group of friends, as far as Mike was concerned) who had directed him to the place initially,

mentioning how he and Jonathan liked to come up here sometimes, for Jonathan to take pictures and Will to practice drawing landscapes, or just to hang out.

It really was a beautiful view. Vast, lush forest extending as far as the eye could see, and not many people knew about that little corner so it was always quiet and tranquil, the silence only broken by the chirping of birds echoing against the hills. They'd come out here a couple of times with the rest of the group, but it was the first time they were here alone. It was even prettier now that it was fall and the leaves had started to change color.

He couldn't think of a better setting to tell Eleven. Now, if only he could pluck up the courage to do it right...

"Mike?" El's voice interrupted his thoughts and he turned to look at her.

"Hmm?"

"Is everything okay?" she asked cautiously, big brown eyes focusing first on his distracted expression and then lowering to his right leg, which he'd unwittingly been bouncing up and down for, he guessed, the last minute or so. It was something he did without noticing when he was nervous, and she knew that.

"Oh! Uh, yeah," he floundered for a second. 'I'm debating with myself whether I have the balls to tell you I love you' wasn't quite the way he wanted the confession to come out. "I was just— I was just thinking of what time we should head back, um, you know, to get you home in time for dinner."

She gave him a look that was somewhere between confused and amused. "We just got here. You already want to go back?"

"N-no!" He shook his head emphatically; maybe a little *over*-emphatically. "I was just— I was just wondering. To make sure. You know, that we get back before curfew," he tried to come up with a rational explanation for his weird behavior and, as usual, only made it worse by babbling. "I mean, you know how the Chief is— I don't want him to think we're out here doing something—" Oh no, he did

not just say that. "—*Not* that I would bring you out here to do *that*— I mean—"

And now he was red up to the tip of his ears, he was sure of it.

"Mike." El stopped his word vomit by grabbing his hands, which he was currently waving anxiously in front of himself like that could somehow wipe away the words that were currently coming out of his mouth. He paused in his flailing, looking back at her in pure mortification.

She smiled at him, understanding. God, he loved that smile. He loved her. "Let's go sit out there?" she suggested, nodding her head toward the front of the car and the landscape that lay before them.

His heart was still beating painfully but her gentle expression reassured him that he hadn't completely ruined everything. He let out the breath he was holding in a relieved sigh. "Y-yeah," he replied with a genuine smile, thanking her without words for knowing him, and knowing how to calm him down. "Right."

They got out of the car— Mike pulling out an extra blanket from the back seat to wrap themselves in because it was chilly up there this time of year— and they sat on the hood overlooking the park, Eleven resting her head on Mike's shoulder as they took in the beautiful view. Every once in a while Mike would mention some random little science-y fact that he'd read about somewhere— about the birds or the squirrels or that type of tree over there— and El would hum her assent, burrowing closer to him for warmth.

This was pretty different from the rest of their dates. Most of the time they just hung out with their friends, and even on the few occasions when they were alone, Mike usually preferred to always come up with something new for them to do, because he knew there were so many things Eleven still had yet to experience, and he wanted her to experience as many fun, interesting activities as she possibly could. So whenever they went out on their own, he'd spend most of their time together commenting on everything they were doing, and she'd spend most of their time together asking questions about every single detail she found herself curious about. He loved it because he loved the way her eyes brightened whenever she found something new she

liked.

It was very rare that they got a quiet moment to just enjoy being together. To his relief, when they did, it was never awkward. El remained a quiet girl, often preferring to observe than to intervene; she was very comfortable with the quiet. And Mike just wanted to be near her, in any capacity. As long as he could feel her presence by him, her fingers intertwined with his, the warmth of her against his side, he didn't feel the need to fill the silence.

Except with those three little words that he definitely needed to say.

"Are you cold?" he murmured against her hair, as he was resting his cheek against the top of her head. She shook her head as best she could against his shoulder and squeezed his hand.

He lifted their joined hands up to his face and kissed the back of hers, almost absent-mindedly. This felt right. It felt like the right moment, and now all he had to do was say it. He took a deep breath, gathering up his courage. "Hey, El?"

"Hmm?" she murmured her acknowledgment, but didn't move to look at him. He bit his lip. She sounded sleepy, which he normally wouldn't mind, but he kinda thought it was important to have her full attention when he was trying to tell her about his feelings. But at the same time, he didn't want her to move. It was a conundrum. Why did love have to be so complicated?

It must've been too long of a pause while he was thinking about it, because she raised her head off his shoulder to look at him either way. "Mike?" she wondered, curious. "What is it?"

"I just..." He sighed. Turning slightly to the side so he was facing her, he grabbed her other hand and held both between his. She looked up at him with those beautiful, magnetic eyes of hers, expectant. And he just— he couldn't not say it. "I love you."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened slightly, but she didn't say anything for a heartbeat, almost as if processing that little piece of information. Just as Mike was beginning to feel like he was hanging off a cliff, the corners of her mouth started crinkling up into a smile.

"...Really?" she asked, a little breathless.

She sounded so genuinely surprised, it made him laugh. "You didn't know?" he asked through chuckles. She shook her head, now grinning along with his laughter. "I feel like everybody else knew!" he admitted, sheepishly. She shrugged, her cheeks reddening; whether it was because of mirth or his confession, he didn't know, but he liked it either way.

She pulled one of her hands from his grasp and moved it to cup his cheek, caressing it softly with her thumb. Then she leaned forward and kissed him, lingering, and the world reduced to the feel of her lips against his and the steady thud of his heart against his chest.

When they pulled back they remained close, touching their foreheads together as they breathed in each other's warmth. "I love you, too," El whispered in a low tone, like she meant the words to be for him and him alone.

Mike's eyes opened in surprise— somehow in his relief that he was finally able to get the words out he'd forgotten to expect her to say it back— and he pulled back a little further, so he could look her in the eye.

He couldn't contain the grin that was forming on his lips. His heart felt like it was about to explode because it couldn't contain so much sheer joy. "Yeah?" he asked, just to make sure he hadn't imagined it. He always figured from her actions that she reciprocated his feelings, but hadn't wanted to assume.

She smiled again and nodded her head. "Yeah." And this time he was the one to lean forward and capture her lips, trying to pour every drop of emotion blooming in his chest into the kiss.

They sat on the hood of his car, watching the scenery and talking about everything and anything, for a while longer. El wanted to stay and watch the sunset, but if they did she would miss her curfew, so regrettably as the afternoon started winding down, they packed up the blanket and the leftover food and set off on their return trip. They did make it back to Hawkins in time for dinner, and he dropped her off at her doorstep with another kiss goodbye— a quick one so her

guardian wouldn't catch them at it, but a treasured moment nonetheless.

As he drove home, he was already itching for it to be the next day so he could see her again. Because he loved this amazing girl— had loved her since day one, and every day since— and somehow, some way, she loved him back. It felt like a whole new beginning.

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Notes: I don't like this as much as *The Happiest*, but the EW reveals gave me too many emotions and I just needed to write something happy from Mike's PoV. Brown County State Park is a real place— I've never been there, but it sure looks gorgeous in pictures! Story title comes from Steven Fiore's song "Makeshift Bouquet."